

THIN IS THE NEW HAPPY

by Valerie Frankel

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About the Author

A Conversation between Valerie Frankel and *What Not to Wear*'s Stacy London

Valerie Frankel: I got dozens of e-mails from readers singing your praises. Did anyone ever mention *Thin Is the New Happy* to you?

Stacy London: God, yes. People called and wrote to me about the book. You made me a lot more sympathetic than I seem on *What Not to Wear*. The way the show is formatted, it's easy to pigeon-hole me as the bad guy. In your book, you did such a good job of translating what I'm trying to say in a way that's made me sound nice and not scary at all.

VF: I never think of you as the bad guy on the show. You're funny, not scary. Clinton is a lot meaner than you!

SL: Maybe my sense of humor isn't for everyone.

VF: Are you sticking with *What Not to Wear*, despite all your fancy endorsement deals? Please say yes.

SL: I am absolutely staying with *What Not to Wear*. We've done over 260 shows, and I still think there's more to say about personal style and body image. Bad body image is among the top two or three reasons women reject or fear clothes. Experts talk about body dysmorphia—seeing yourself as having abnormal parts when, in fact, you are not abnormal—as a rare disorder. But I think we've all got a touch of it. You can certainly make yourself crazy about the demands put on women to be attractive. I've been up and down the scale my whole life. And I've blamed the pres-

"I was a walking contradiction and identity crisis."



sure I've felt to be thin on our culture. But the more you think about it—and you, Val, really nailed this point in *TITNH*—bad body image is a symptom, but not the disease. A woman who doesn't like her body wears sweatpants to be invisible. The shell, the style itself, is evidence of an identity crisis. That's been my issue for my entire life. Who do I want to be? How am I failing myself? Am I too fat, have I gained weight? As I've gotten older, I've been better. But it's still a challenge. The more I'm in the public eye, the more it's an issue for me.

VF: My breakthrough, in terms of style and identity, was realizing that clothes aren't superficial. Feeling special in clothes is a profound emotion. Dressing well doesn't mean I'm a lemming or a nitwit.

SL: You do what you can. One of the issues I feel strongly about lately—and it's the angle I'm going for more on *What Not to Wear*—is how style represents a woman's emotional state. It's amazing how you can look at a wardrobe and see immediately what she is inherently insecure about. The layers of defenses she's built up are evident in her clothes. It's all there in her closet. With women especially, a terrible wardrobe tells a long story. We're finding new ways to tap into that on the show, get to the underlying reasons and forcing someone to really look at herself. Not just her clothes, but her life and her sense of self.

VF: That's exactly what you did for me. It's been two plus years since you cleaned out my closet and forced me to address my issue: Why was I

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dressing in a way that denied the essence of my personality? I was afraid of being judged by my weight, and yet I dressed in a way that made me look even larger than I really was. I was a walking contradiction and identity crisis.

SL: And now?

VF: I've spent more money on clothes in the last couple of years than I have in my entire previous life. So I'm poorer. But you know damn well that I'm a million times happier. My closet is my sanctuary. It's a world of possibilities, just as you said. Getting dressed and picking outfits makes me feel special every morning. My wardrobe and personality match—or, as you say on *What Not to Wear*, they "go." It's the difference between feeling out of whack versus being in sync every minute of every day.

SL: Another life saved.

VF: Amen, sister.

Want to know what Stacy thinks about the personal style of a famous TV talk show host?

What does she think about men and body image?

What would Joan Rivers say?

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Postscript to *Thin Is the New Happy*

It's been eight months since the hardcover publication of *Thin Is the New Happy*. Eight fabulous months of bathing in the warmth of acknowledgement and camaraderie. Along with dozens of kvell-worthy reviews (*TITNH* was my nineteenth book—and the first to be reviewed in *The New York Times*), I received hundreds of e-mails from readers who found themselves in my story, got it, totally related to my experiences. Some had fatphobic mothers and found comfort in knowing they weren't alone. Some were fatphobic mothers who were desperate to get a grip on themselves or turn their daughters into, well, me. Fellow diet addicts vowed to try the not-diet. The word "hope" came up a lot, as in, "You give me hope I can conquer my own body-image demons." My fondest hope is that all of the women who wrote to me have managed to stop the insanity of dieting and have silenced their inner bitches once and for all.

Of course, you can't please all the women, all the time. Some readers found my story to be puny, banal, "ordinary" (to that reviewer, I ask, "Is it ordinary to become a widow at 35?"). One angry e-mailer called me an "East Coast snob." I am guilty of being a New Yorker. I'll take "vaguely misanthropic." But snob? I've seen too many of the real thing to accept that hit. An Amazon reviewer accused me of "self-loathing," and said I was desperately in need of intensive psychotherapy. Hmmm, my self-loathing was kinda the point of writing the book. I'm much better now, or didn't she read that far?

*“My dream
as a writer has
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The New York Post’s Page Six gossip column covered *TITNH*, giving it several paragraphs in an item titled “Mag Editor Dopes to Stay Thin” about my cocaine use in the early 1990s at *Mademoiselle*. Ancient history to some, breaking news to others. The Page Six item was picked up by American Web sites galore, including *New York* magazine, *The Huffington Post*, *Jezebel*, and *Jossip*. The blog entries caught the eye of producers at *Entertainment Tonight* and *The Tyra Banks Show*. (Tyra, despite what you might’ve heard, is not-a-bitch. The day I taped her show, she was friendly and smiley, and agreed with the not-diet philosophy completely. I liked her.) *TITNH* was suddenly abuzz.

Surreally, the story of my lifelong struggle with body image jumped across the Atlantic Ocean. Two London newspapers—*The Daily Mail* and *The Observer*—ran excerpts, and reprinted my naked photos along with the text. One morning, I received an urgent e-mail from a British TV producer asking for permission to show my nudie pix on his program, a British version of *The View*, as a launch point for the hosts to chat about body image. By the time I replied (“er, okay, I guess”), they’d already broadcast a slideshow of quivering, unclothed me, and had a hearty discussion about my “bravery.” After England, *TITNH* traveled around the world, from Italy and Spain to Australia and South Africa.

Attention memoirists: If you wish to get publicity for your book, display your naked flesh like wallpaper in a foreign country.

I’m recounting the wildfire of media attention for



TITNH not to brag (although, damn, that was exciting!) but to marvel at how profoundly bad body image affects the lives of women all over the globe. My (puny, banal, ordinary, self-loathing) story rang distinct and distant bells from Dublin to Johannesburg. As I mentioned in *TITNH*, my dream as a writer has always been to make an impact on readers near and far, for my ideas and experiences to touch women's lives. Thanks to *TITNH*, I've reached people and been accepted into sympathetic hearts and expansive minds. Not surprisingly, *TITNH* was the first time I'd really put myself out there in print, complete honesty, no holding back about my deepest insecurities.

As gratifying as it has been to connect with readers down the block and across the planet, the book release has caused some trouble here at home. At store signings, book fairs, clubs, and events, one of the most commonly asked questions is: "Has your mother read the book, and what does she think of it?"

My mom has not read a word of the book, nor any of the reviews. You'll recall, when I asked her to read the manuscript, she said she wanted nothing to do with it. Judy has kept her word. She (and my father) pretend *TITNH* doesn't exist. That has been a challenge for Mom, especially when the ladies of Short Hills approach her at the Kings supermarket to say, "How could Valerie do that to you?"

"My friends are outraged on my behalf," said Mom at the time. "You have no idea how hard this is for me."

*In Her
Own Words*

*“I haven’t
dieted since the
day I started
to write [this
book].”*

After an initial flare of resentment (“Since you haven’t read the book, you have no idea how hard you made my adolescence,” I thought), the guilt settled in. I didn’t intend to embarrass Judy in front of her friends, or hold her up as a bad parent. As I said repeatedly in *TITNH*, Judy was a fine mother, except for her obsession about weight. She freely admits she was obsessed. To some extent, she’s proud of it. Many of her friends treated their daughters the same way. My great sin was writing about it. I exposed the suburban secret abuse of fatphobic mothers, called them to the empty table, and that was a break from the unspoken rules of discretion and dignity.

Judy feels betrayed. I am sorry about that. According to my friends, my mom’s portrayal in *TITNH* was fair. Another generational divide? Mom took her pain like a trooper and kept her trap shut. I come from the heart-on-sleeve, flapping lips era, although it took thirty years of mustering courage to confront Mom about her treatment of me and write about it.

I’ll finish up my postscript with the most e-mailed and asked question from readers and book club members: “Are you still not dieting?”

I am a devotee of not-dieting. I haven’t dieted since the day I started to write *TITNH*, nearly three years ago. In all honesty, my weight has fluctuated within a small range. I can’t say how many pounds up and down since I don’t weigh myself (a HUGE relief, meanwhile). If I had to guess, I’d say I’ve gone up maybe seven pounds max. But then my fabulous clothes start to feel



tight, and it breaks my heart not to wear a favorite jacket or pair of pants. Instead of getting depressed, I just increase my workouts. I jog longer, and/or add an extra gym visit to the week. I cut back on sugar—if I'd been having frozen yogurt every night, I limit it to every other night, for example. A couple of weeks later, my clothes fit again, and I'm extra happy because, although my size fluctuated slightly, my mood remained the same. I have become an emotionally stable woman, at least about weight.

Does this mean my life is perfect? I wish! I'm still plenty neurotic about other *bêtes*—money, my husband's beer consumption, epidemic brattiness among the neighborhood kids, my shaky professional standing, the rudeness of cell-phoning assholes in movie theaters, my own shallowness and impatience as a mother, wife, and human being (all of which I'll contend with in my next memoir for St. Martin's, *It's Hard Not to Hate You*). But, as of this writing on May 1, 2009—and, I firmly believe, the rest of my life, however long it might be—I've got body image beat.

Moving along . . .

What do Valerie's daughters think of her book?

How did her husband handle all the publicity?

What ever happened to X., Y., and Z.?

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*In Her
Own Words*



Recommended Reading

I read widely, jumping genres, fiction, nonfiction, graphic novels, pretty much anything I can get my hands on. I love so many books, it's impossible to make a list. Instead, I'll recommend some of my favorite authors:

Christopher Moore, especially *Fool, You Suck*, and *A Dirty Job*. Many readers of *Thin Is the New Happy* have commented on my sense of humor. Moore's books make me LOFL (I put in the F for fucking). So, if you are looking for amusing, ribald, and clever novels—sex, foul language, supernatural beings, and chock-o-block human emotions—get Moore.

Lindsey Davis. For historical mystery fans, I love Davis's sleuth series set in ancient *Rome*. Her main character, Marcus Falco, is as sexy, charming, and fearless as the best romance-novel hero, plus he's always wearing a toga or tunic for easy access. This series is EIGHTEEN novels strong. I've read 'em all. Loved 'em all. I once corresponded with Davis (slavishly devoted fan drivel), and she was very nice.

Jonathan Kellerman. In a psychological thriller, what better main character than a shrink? Alex Delaware, Kellerman's finest creation, is smart, sympathetic, and erudite, with a voyeuristic dark side that I, for one, find humanizing and appealing. Everything I know of Los Angeles comes from Kellerman novels. Which means LA is populated exclusively with serial murders, sexual predators, and killer cultists. Never a dull moment.

Stephanie Laurens. For Regency romance (and, honestly, is there any other kind???) I get all the twitching, throbbing, heavy-breathing satisfaction

I can stand from Laurens. She supplies ruced nipples, quivering thighs, and shattering climaxes galore, as well as period details and a hoof-clomping, canter-paced plots.

Christopher Buckley. The modern satirist extraordinaire. His most famous novel is *Thank You for Smoking* but I also recommend *Boomsday* and *Supreme Courtship*. Buckley has the rare gift of clairvoyance. His novels come out and then, soon after, real world events unfold uncannily as he'd portrayed them in his books.

Mark Bittman. What, you don't sit down and read cookbooks? What's wrong with you? The *New York Times* columnist is my foodie idol. In *How to Cook Everything*, he makes any recipe seem easy, even the really freaking hard ones. No wonder he calls himself "The Minimalist." I can't cook without him. I feel like I know him. I wish I could meet him! Mark Bittman, if you're reading this, CALL ME!

John Twelve Hawkes. In the sci-fi fantasy category, I love the intense, serious, and creepy Dark River series, about a secret society of sword-wielding Harlequins who live off the grid and thwart the machinations of their ancient enemies. The characters go on trips to hell-like other worlds, such as the land of the hungry ghosts where everyone is starving, but there is nothing to eat (a.k.a. my nightmare). Twelve Hawkes (not his real name) lives off the grid himself. His location and identity are mysteries to all but his agent. Knowing that adds a sharp edge of paranoia to his already disturbing vision of our future.

*Keep on
Reading*



Reading Group Questions

1. A show of hands: Is anyone on a diet right now? Who has been on a diet during the past year? What kind of success have you had trying to lose weight?
2. Valerie Frankel begins her book by sharing a series of dieting metaphors. A drug addiction. A gambling addiction. The five stages of grief. Do you have any of your own you'd like to add?
3. Did you find the author's tales of chronic dieting humorous or sad? Empowering or self-defeating? Discuss the issues of beauty, body image, and self-acceptance that are raised in *Thin Is the New Happy*. Does the book cover these issues in a unique way? How are they typically discussed—and portrayed—in mainstream American culture?
4. Valerie decided to tackle her dieting obsession once and for all around the time her daughters were reaching puberty. In what ways do you think Valerie's attitudes about her own body changed once she became a mother? Do you think weight is a different issue for children than it is for adults? How?
5. In her postscript, the author mentions that her mother, Judy, never read *Thin Is the New Happy*. Judy's friends did, however—and were outraged on her behalf. What do you think of Valerie's portrayal of Judy in this memoir? Was it fair and balanced? Did Judy emerge as a sympathetic character . . . or a bad mother? And what do you think of Judy now?



6. “I am a connoisseur of insult and criticism,” writes the author. “My ears prick up to catch the slightest intonations, the smallest hint of negativity, even in a seemingly benign comment.” Another show of hands: Who in the group can recall at least one episode of childhood taunting? (Some of you may want to share your stories.) How can “innocent” teasing have a lifelong effect on one’s sense of self?
7. Take a moment to talk about the men, past and present, in Valerie’s life. How did they view her? Were they able to see her for who she is on the inside? Also, how did you react when her husband told her: “I adore every inch of your body. And it’d be even better if you could get rid of the stomach.” In what ways did this one remark unleash a lifetime of bad feelings Valerie had about her weight? How would you feel in her shoes—or his?
8. After reading the author Q&A in this Reading Group Gold guide, do you agree with Stacy London that bad body image is a symptom, not a disease? Which was it for Valerie? Why?
9. Valerie decided that, with this book, she would finally tell the “naked truth” about her weight obsession. With this in mind, have a look at one of Valerie’s nude *Self* magazine photographs (go to: <http://origin.www.self.com/health/2007/06/how-nude-portraits-can-help-self-image>). What do you think, now that you’ve seen it? Does it make you think any differently about the author’s journey? How?

*Keep on
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